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ABSTRACT

Perspectives that stem from the free enterprise philosophy/economy of the United States make up this paper that presents a private American citizen's view of several international communications/information issues. Topics discussed include the World Administrative Radio Conference; direct broadcast by satellite; the transfer of technology between nations; the economic and social aspects of media; the immense diversity of media; the need for strong, accurate media representing more than one point of view in all nations; the question of cultural imposition; the proliferation of consumer oriented societies; and the need for effective communication between those who deal with information systems, especially in developing nations. (AEA)

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The New World Information Order Revisited

A Background Paper

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Contribution to Plenary Session

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(NOTE: This discussion paper suggests one private American citizen's view of several international communications/ information issues.)

I propose that the continuing debate in international circles about whether there will be a New World Information Order--and how it should be defined--is irrelevant. It is too narrow. While we have been so busy deciding how many reporters can dance on the head of a computer terminal, the shape of the world's communications and information patterns changed right before our ayes (and in many cases nayes).

I further propose we hereby declare a moritorium on that particular debate and get on with the business of deciding what actions must be undertaken so all of us can get something useful out of the New World Information Order that already is here.

I propose that when historians look back at what really has been happening during the past five years they will comment on how out-of-sync and out-of-date our debates have been.

I propose they will discover that a combination of the incredible explosion in technology...and most important... the amazingly rapid development of the Third World's communications techniques, technology and ability will show that the imbalance in the flow of information has diminished significantly. I do not contend that the imbalance is gone. More information still flows from the

developed to the developing world and the types of information flows are not necessarily 100 per cent perfect. The imbalance remains. It is real. It may never be completely reversed or balanced. I also believe history will show today there is a consensus building in the West which says that, in this interdependent world, too much of a tilt is bad for us all.

I propose that the growth of national news agencies, regional news organizations, national radio and television networks, satellite transmissions, new phone systems, cheaper earth stations springing up like meadow weeds, along with growing Third World production facilities for books, newspapers, movies, advertising (where it is allowed) external broadcasting, and data bases, eventually will be reported as one of the great untold success stories of this generation.

I propose the historians will say this story was untold, in part, because we simply didn't have the time to quantify it...in part because we couldn't see it all...and in part because a number of Third World spokepersons used communications/information issues to reach other political means. Of course, there are those in the West who would ignore certain developments to reach opposite means.

I propose that a look back on today's world would find, except for some obvious deviations from the norm, that the major Western news organizations and their reporters and editors--for the most part--have been sensitized to the problems. Studies probably will show that in the late 1970's reporters <u>were</u> more aware than before that alien

cultures couldn't always be judged by what happened in the U.S. or U.K. or Tanzania or Thailand. Yet, all reporters continued to have an obligation to report events in far away places from the standpoint of how events would impact on the countries of their primary audiences.

What I am proposing, in summary is that in five years or so, when historians evaluate this period they will say that fact and perception didn't coincide.

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That said, there are a couple of clarifying points that must be made.

First...perceptions can be much more important than facts in the political arena. The fields are flowering with fertile perceptions which became self-fulfilling facts. Communications/information issues as much political as technological. And politics can mold technology.

Second... I discussed the Third World. I don't see such progress in the Fourth World...the poorest of the poor. Their problems continue to be massive. Solving them will take years...if they are ever solved at all.

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Now some observations about current issues in the limelite.

WARC--There are real differences of opinion over such issues as the allocation of the electronic spectrum. You may recall an ICC member's remarks at the 1977 annual meeting. Speaking about the 1979 World Administrative Radio Conference he said:

> You have ten per cent of the world's population and 90 per cent of the spectrum. We have 90 per cent of the world's population and ten per cent of the spectrum. We want our share.

I personally think that there is an excellent chance that technology will move so fast that in the very near future just about everyone's basic needs can be met no matter what happens at WARC -- except maybe in the lower bands where Third and Fourth World nations are going to fight with everyone else for broadcasting space.

WARC, however, will be quite important as a monitor of the perception of merging technological advances and understanding of Third World concerns. WARC also will display an ever-sharpening picture of how information/communications issues have become part of the East/West as well as the North/South dialogues. A good arguments can be made, for example, that the SALT Treaty is basically an information/communications treaty.

DBS--The issue of direct broadcast by satellite (DBS) may be a good illustrative point about technology's role. Back a technological eon or two--in 1977--a WARC divided

up the available DBS spectrum for Europe, Asia, and Africa. The Americas were not part of the deliberations, the U.S. delegation, in good faith, had convinced others that the technology being used as the basis of the negotiations was out-of-date...and anyway, there probably wouldn't be any DBS in the hemisphere for many years. "Why not wait a while before dividing the spectrum in the New World?" They argued.

Well, they and just about everyone else who follows such issues certainly must have been surprised to open their morning newspapers two months ago to discover that COMSAT is expecting to provide a form of DBS in the continental U.S.A. by the early 1980's. Meanwhile, we are beginning to see advertisements in some of the consumer press for the "dishes" that pick up satellite down links... in effect, you can buy your own simple earth station for about the same price as an expensive radio-tv-stereo combination.

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER--There also are real and serious differences of opinion over the transfer of technology and know-how. What is considered to be proprietary and private and for use of corporations-for-profit in some societies, is considered to be "undemocratic", antisocial and even neocolonialist in other societies. This may be a continuing and unsolvable problem for many years-- or until some poorer societies get up-to-speed.

ECONOMIC/SOCIAL--The economic and social aspects of media--including, news, views, movies, television, posters and advertising--will continue for some time to be debatable issues. Not only on the international scene, but to a smaller extent domestically in the U.S.

DIVERSITY--A lot of people in the U.S. believe there aren't very many "truths" left in the world. They want to see a variety of points of view so they can make up their own minds. This is relatively easy, if you set your course to do so, in many parts of the developed world and especially in major American metropolitan areas. Anyone who reads a daily paper, listens to more than one radio station...and most Western adults do...will get some variety of views. Our diversity of media is immense. Throughout Metropolitan Washington for example, a radio listener can hear several Baltimore-area stations as well as local broadcasts. Thus we can pick up about 60 AM and FM stations. We can view over a dozen TV stations, although there is some duplication of programming, and buy hundreds of magazines, newsletters and papers if we wish.

With this much to choose from, and the continual pull for peoples' time and minds, there is some logic to the claim that we treat media as a commodity.

Most Americans who think about these things realize there are societies which are not as information-rich as we and whose leaders believe that at this stage in their nation's development there is a need for media to be treated

purely in its social terms (although we might define those terms differently). Such Americans would understand these societies are going through a phase long past for us in the U.S.A...that building a unified nation from a jig-saw puzzle of ethnic and tribal groups can really be a difficult job, at best.

I think you also will find that the vast majority of Americans will suddenly comprehend the developing world's problems better when it is explained that the diversity of media we have in the U.S. just isn't possible where the main concern is getting enough newsprint or any kind of paper to print an eight-page newssheet...or on finding out there aren't enough people who can read a particular language to provide that society with its own paper...or that there just aren't enough working radio or tv receivers so that one set of messages can be disseminated--let alone having competition among broadcasters.

STRONG, ACCURATE MEDIA--Generally, we do feel there should be a strong, accurate media in all nations, and that more than one point of view should be available to all citizens. Time Incorporated's chief editor, Henry Grunwald, discussed a reason for this in a recent letter to Sean McBride, President of the International Commission for the study of Communications Problems at UNESCO:

> Inevitably, the local press and broadcast media become an important news source for foreign journalists, and much could be done to improve the quality of information transmitted abroad if the press in the developing countries were aided and strengthened.

Grunwald's point takes on increased significance when you realize that whether in business or government or the academic community,most pertinent information reaching international decision-makers tends to come first from the media. Later information either confirms, denies or elaborates on those reports. Even the U.S. State Deparment and the White House often get their first inkling of a development from a news wire or radio report. This most often is the case for Congress, which does not have the huge international fact-gathering apparatus available to the executive branch of government.

If you think about that for a moment, you can come up with the arguments for or against media censorship. Depending on which side of the issue you believe in. Personally, I think we should have a variety of inputs before the decisions are made.

CULTURE--Another difference of opinion that will not go away soon, is the question of cultural imposition or the one-way flow of culture. I am beginning to hear rumblings that the next so-called "hot" issue is going to be a New World Cultural Order.

There are many in the United States who are sensitive to the desires of ethnic groups... the Hispanics, the Blacks, Italians, Polish decendents, Jews, the American Indians, refugees from South East Asia and others...who wish to maintain the best of the cultures of their forefathers. It will be interesting to see how this issue develops.

CONSUMER SOCIETY--Many vocal spokespersons in the U.S. are concerned about our own consumer society. They and others would understand if it was explained to them that some nation's leaders don't or won't want their countries to become consumer oriented societies.

On the other hand, when our goods and services are offered--and in turn they are purchased by people, businesses or governments in other societies--that says to us the purchasers want to buy them. They don't have to buy U.S. films and TV shows and records and books anymore. There is a wide choice of other products available. Just look at the cornucopia coming out of Mexico. So the U.S. sellers, or the Western sellers, don't believe that they should be expected to change their sales techniques or pull their items off the markets.

From a political standpoint this still is a hot item. The old figures that show the U.S. totally dominates the marketplace still make good copy. Though the situation probably is much different today, as the marketplaces and exchanges of information products become more extensive this issue will diminish. But, for now the perception remains. And it still is true that the West produces more "information products" than the South.

There, of course, are a variety of other issues that could be discussed...privacy and its relationship to Transborder Data Flows; earth sensing and the concerns of the developing world for control over the use of information

gathered v. the attitude that this information should belong to anyone who wants it; ownership of satellite parking spaces; censorship and the differences of opinion over prior consent; copyrights, patents; PTT rates; international press rates; the Helsinki accords and their interpretations; the argument over differences between communications for development and communications development; the right to communicate; the plethora of issues being discussed at UNESCO such as licensing journalists and the international right of reply...and more. These are problems that in the context of today's discussions appear to be real and unsolvable. And maybe they are.

TRANSLATORS NEEDED--On the broadest level, however, I think that one of the major problems facing the spokespersons on information/communications issues, is that they are having trouble communicating information to each other. For several months I have been trying to find a way to illustrate this in one not-overly-simplified paragraph. I still don't have it accurately yet, but here is something close:

> The basic problem is definition of the word DEVELOPMENT. When Third and Fourth World spokespersons talk about development or use the phrase "developing nations"--for better or for worse--Americans subsconsciously translate development into MODERNIZATION. And, since most citizens only know modernization in our own context--which usually means a better standard of living--they think of the developing world as wanting to get more of the "better things of life"--like better housing, wider variety of products, cars, color TV,

a different change of clothes for each day, etc. But to the developing world spokespersons, development usually means nation and infrastructure building, and becoming stronger in a variety of way's not intuitively comprehended in Washington, Wisconsin or Waterloo.

As communicators we are not doing a terrific job.

The best way, in my opinion, for the developing world to make progress with the American public and also with its opinion leaders, is to use the techniques and tools used by U.S. mass marketers of ideas. And to use them in the U.S.A. That means spending some money and it means a commitment of effort that will last a few years. But the outcome should be worthwhile.

There's no secret on how to create and carry out such educational drives. It is done all the time. Current examples include the wide ranging efforts to get Americans to conserve energy. Through sophisticated communications techniques that are honest, open and aimed at education and understanding--not rhetoric--it is possible to make great strides.

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In summary, in this one man's opinion, we have reached the point where:

--there already is a New World Information Order

--there is a large and still growing body of thoughtful individuals in the U.S. who are sensitive to the concerns of developing nations, though they don't always agree with each other, let alone with all the shades of developing world opinion...and they often don't understand what developing nations spokespersons are talking about.

--the time has come for action on some of the issues, such as imbalanced flow of information and for action toward greater understanding.

--instead of fearing new information techniques, sources or "orders", we should be trying to figure out how to use them to the best advantage for us all.

And, finally, I think we have to realize and emphasize that we will never totally agree on most things. But, who really would want that? Total agreement would make for a very dull world indeed.